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360 DEGREE AUTOMOBILE VIDEO CAMERA SYSTEM

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Related Application

The present application is a continuation in part application of US Patent application 09/494,060 filed on January 28, 2000 which has received notice of allowance and for which the issue fee has been paid and which in turn is a continuation in part of Provisional U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 60/124,624 filed on March 16, 1999 and for which priority is claimed under 35USC 120.

2. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a video camera system in a vehicle not limited to but including an automobile. In particular the present invention relates to a video camera which has a 360° range for video recording inside and outside of an automotive vehicle and thereby providing documentation for police officers or vehicle owners.

3. The Prior Art

The use of videotaping systems for an automobile is known. U.S. Patent No. 4,78,904 relates to a vehicle mounted surveillance system. The system has a camera and a control head inside a police vehicle and a video recorder in a bullet proof, fire proof vault of the vehicle.

The system is used as a surveillance system to videotape located in the trunk of a vehicle.

It would be preferred to have a system with a 360° range for video taping a 360° area simultaneously thus videotaping both inside and outside of the vehicle. It would be preferable to be able to retract the camera when not in use.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is a principal object of the present invention to provide a video camera system for documentary videotaping in a 360° range around the camera's location.

It is another object to provide a 360° range camera to be located behind and underneath the rear view mirror of an automobile vehicle.

It is a further object to VCR (video-cassette recorder) for ready image.

It is another object to provide a commercial VCR system which operates off the automotive vehicle's battery.

It is still another object to locate the multiplexer and VCR either inside a glove compartment or a trunk of the automotive vehicle.

It is a further object to provide a video camera system which provides a 360 degree simultaneous video taping documentation for

police officers to serve as evidence for appropriate situations when vehicles and/or individuals are within range of the police officer's vehicle.

It is still another object to provide a video camera system which provides a 360 degree simultaneous video taping documentation for vehicle owners to serve as evidence of vehicle theft or police abuse that occur within range of the owner's vehicle.

It is yet another object to provide a video camera system which provides a 360 degree simultaneous video taping documentation for vehicle owners to serve as documentation of accidents and injuries and for related insurance purposes therefor that occur within range of the owner's vehicle.

Other objects will become readily apparent from the foregoing description and accompanying drawings in which:

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a top view of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a view of the monitor along line 2 of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a partial sectional view along lines 3-3 of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is a partial sectional view of line 4-4 of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is an alternative embodiment of the invention in which the camera has a circularly-shaped housing; and

FIG. 6 is another alternative embodiment of the invention in which the camera has a cube-shaped housing;

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring to the drawings, FIG. 1 shows a top view of the invention, a 360 degree video camera system inside of an automotive vehicle 1. The 360 degree camera system includes a camera housing 5, a multiplexer unit 15 and a video cassette recorder (VCR) 18 and optionally a monitor 19, as shown in FIGS. 1 and 2.

The camera housing 5, as shown in FIG. 3, can be mounted on the supporting mount 7 of the rear view mirror 8 of the automotive vehicle 1. As shown in FIG. 3, the camera housing 5 can be moved so that it can be retracted and placed behind the rear view mirror 8 in position A when not in use or extended below the rear view mirror 8 in position B when in use. A hinge mechanism 9 can articulately move the camera on its mount from position A to position B and vice verse. Alternatively other mechanical arrangements might be employed such as having the camera mount designed as a telescopic rod for extending and retracting the camera behind or below the rear view mirror respectively.

The camera housing 5 is preferably formed to accommodate a 4 Board CCD or a PC51 Series CMOS inline Microvideo Camera sold by Super Circuits, Inc., Leander, Texas, which is mounted on a 1 inch to 2 inch mount giving it a 360 degree view inside and outside the vehicle. These miniature video cameras can be black and white or color cameras. It is understood, however, that any other miniature camera system can be used and the invention is not limited to these specific examples.

There is a swivel unit for the camera housing 5 which attaches to the rear view mirror.

The system includes preferably a 5 inch or 6 inch LCD video monitor for viewing the camera recorded images (FIG. 2). The monitor can be color or black and white and can flip up or down.

Wires run from the camera housing to the multiplexer which records with time and date, either in color or black and white, all four miniature video cameras at the same time. Then the wires run into a VCR which along with the miniature video cameras and multiplexer operate off the vehicle's battery 22, preferably by a wire harness (not shown) to which the wires for the miniature cameras, the multiplexer 15 and the VCR 18 run and from which the wire harness connects to the vehicle's battery 22.

Preferably, the camera housing 5 can be configured into any geometric shape and is not limited to the shapes described herein. FIGS. 3 -5 shows the camera housing as a ring shaped or circular housing (or cube shaped as shown in FIG. 6) with lenses on each side. Preferably four miniature video cameras are provided on each side of the housing spaced 90 degrees apart but the number of cameras 11 can vary if desired. The miniature video cameras 11 provide the camera housing 5 with a 360 degree range for video recording everything around the camera housing 5, namely the interior of the automotive vehicle and the exterior of the automotive vehicle by recording through the windshield, side and rear windows of the automotive vehicle 1. The camera housing 5 and cameras 11 can run off the automotive vehicle's battery as shown in FIG.1. The system includes a multiplexer 15 and a VCR 18. The multiplexer 15 permits all the recorded view from each camera 11 of

the camera housing 5 to be placed together to provide a 360 degree picture. Thus in a four camera arrangement, the multiplexer 15 provides for the four cameras images to be placed side by side by side by side for display as recorded in the VCR 18 and displayed in the monitor 19. The VCR 18 records these images. One suitable multiplexer 15 for the present invention is Model No. DPX4 for color video taping and Mode 1 No. MX4M for black and white video taping available from Advanced Technology Video Inc. of Redmond, Washington. Of course the present invention is not limited to any one particular multiplexer model.

The multiplexer 15 and the VCR 18 are placed together and preferably stacked one on top of the other either in the trunk 22 of the automotive vehicle as shown in FIG.1 or in the glove compartment of the automotive vehicle (not shown).

The wiring between the camera housing 5, the multiplexer 15 and VCR 18 and optionally the monitor 19 can be placed behind the panels of the sidewalls, roof and dashboard of the vehicle as shown in FIG.1 to keep the installation of the present invention less intrusive and the wiring concealed for aesthetic appearances. The monitor 19, VCR 18 and the multiplexer 15 can also run off the automotive vehicle's battery 22. Thus, preferably, all four video cameras 11, the multiplexer 15 and the VCR 19 have wires running to a wire harness which is connected to the vehicle's battery 22. Alternatively any other power supply can be provided such as batteries for the camera, multiplexer and VCR.

Alternatively, the camera housing 5 can be part of the housing

of the rear view mirror. In other words, the camera housing can be incorporated or built into the housing of the rear view mirror.

In another embodiment(not shown), the miniature video camera can be a miniature digital video camera and instead of a multiplexer unit and a VCR, the miniature digital camera would be wired into digital recording system. The digital recording system would be located in either the glove compartment or the trunk in place of the multiplexer unit and the VCR and similarly the miniature digital camera would be located as described for the location of the camera and camera housing 5 herein. Examples of digital video cameras that can be used in the present invention may include but are not limited to JVC DVM 90 and Sony DCRPC 9.

Examples of digital recorders that can be used in the present invention may include but are not limited to Sony GVD 300, Sony GVD 600 and Mobil view II Digital Recorder.

Although the invention is described in particular for use in automotive vehicles, it can also be utilized in other vehicles involving but not limited to aircrafts, boats, trains, etc.

While presently preferred embodiments have been described for purposes of the disclosure, numerous changes in the arrangement of method steps and apparatus parts can be made by those skilled in the art. Such changes are encompassed within the spirit of the invention as defined by the appended claims.